Short articles

Evidence for the prehistoric occupation of the Upper Cuckmere Valley

Mike Seager Thomas
Artefact Services, Lower Ground, 12 St Nicholas Lane, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2JY.

INTRODUCTION

A large assemblage of prehistoric flintwork (some 670 items) has been brought to the attention of the society by Mr Richard Channing, who collected it from two fields just east of the Cuckoo Trail near his home in Hellingly. Both fields had been under pasture until recently. The Cuckoo Trail assemblage adds significantly to a small body of evidence which shows that the locale, on and just above the flood-plain of the River Cuckmere, was exploited during prehistory. Present is material of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze Age date. The assemblage, which adds to the range of implement types known locally, shows a continuity of interest in the area through all three periods. Mr Channing continues to the monitor the site and will retain the finds.

THE FLINT AND ITS FINDSPOT

The two fields are situated either side of a minor, westward draining tributary of the Cuckmere (NGR TQ 5850 1155). Key to understanding the distribution of the assemblage is the geology underlying the two fields. The south-west corner of the field to the north is on alluvium, the field to the south is on iron-rich river terrace deposits. Neither contains *in-situ* natural flint. When Mr Channing collected the assemblage, he made no attempt to separate flint from the two fields, but it contains both heavily and slightly iron-stained material. On visiting the site I observed that flint on the field to the south was heavily iron-stained and that flint on the field to the north was less so. Damage to some of these showed that the staining is superficial and relates, not to the original source of the material, but to a difference in post-depositional environment. Thus, with a few exceptions, it has been possible to divide the finds between the two fields.

The bulk of the assemblage comes from the south-west corner of the field to the north, where a concentration of undiagnostic debitage is visible today. Two typological groups are distinguishable within it, one early and one late. The early group includes a large obliquely-blunted point of Early Mesolithic type and many blades, blade tools and small blade and flake cores of undifferentiated Mesolithic/Early Neolithic type. Characteristic of this group is core preparation, visible both on the cores and the blades struck from them. The later group includes a bi-facially flaked laurel-leaf point, a thumbnail scraper, part of a flaked axe and several barbed and tanged arrowheads. These are of Neolithic and/or Early Bronze Age date. Also present are many flakes, flake cores and flake tools. Mr Channing notes that most of the blades, the flaked axe and the butt-end of a polished axe come from one part of the field and that the barbed-and-tanged arrowheads come from another. The much smaller quantity of material from the field to the south includes a roughly flaked Neolithic adze and a handful of flake tools.

Typologically, the extent of the two groups is blurred by uncertainties among specialists regarding the chronological attribution of some tool types, particularly flake scrapers. Blade technology and core preparation, however, are thought to be diagnostic of the Mesolithic/Early Neolithic period, while assemblages of large flakes, especially if they include tools with invasive retouch (Fig. 2:30), are thought to be later. This allows a number of chronological attributions to be made (Table 1; Figs 1 & 2). Apart from enabling me to identify the difference between the flint from the two fields, my visit broadly confirmed the dating suggested above by adding a Late Mesolithic scalene triangle, a further blade core and a sherd of flint and grog-tempered Beaker pottery to the assemblage from the field to the north, and a flake-end scraper to the assemblage from the field to the south.

RAW MATERIAL

The origin of most of the flint is the Downs. A few frost-shattered surfaces deeply patinated prior to knapping recommend a source in a secondary deposit, such as the Clay-with-flints, over one on the chalk (*see* Appendix). The flint used for the adze, which is more deeply iron-stained than the rest of the assemblage and was probably iron-stained prior to manufacture, derives from the Clay-with-flints or nearby plateau gravels. The remainder is beach-battered: it comes directly from the seashore or indirectly via Wealden river gravels.

PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY

Although Mr Channing's method was unsystematic, the assemblage was collected by him over many visits to the site, and there is every reason to suppose that it is representative of the activities which took place there. The cores are the waste product of tool manufacture. The very large number of Mesolithic or Early Neolithic examples indicates repeated visits to, if not long-term occupation of, the site during this period. An unusual find associated with this period is a group of hollow scrapers fashioned from early blade and flake cores (Fig. 1:19). All show clear evidence of heavy use-wear in the hollow. They were probably used in the manufacture of arrow shafts (cf. Clark 1927). The remaining early material is typical of the lightweight tool kits conventionally associated with mobile hunter-gatherer groups. The later material is rather different. As well as lightweight tools, it includes three heavy core-tools. Putting aside any possible ritual considerations, this implies

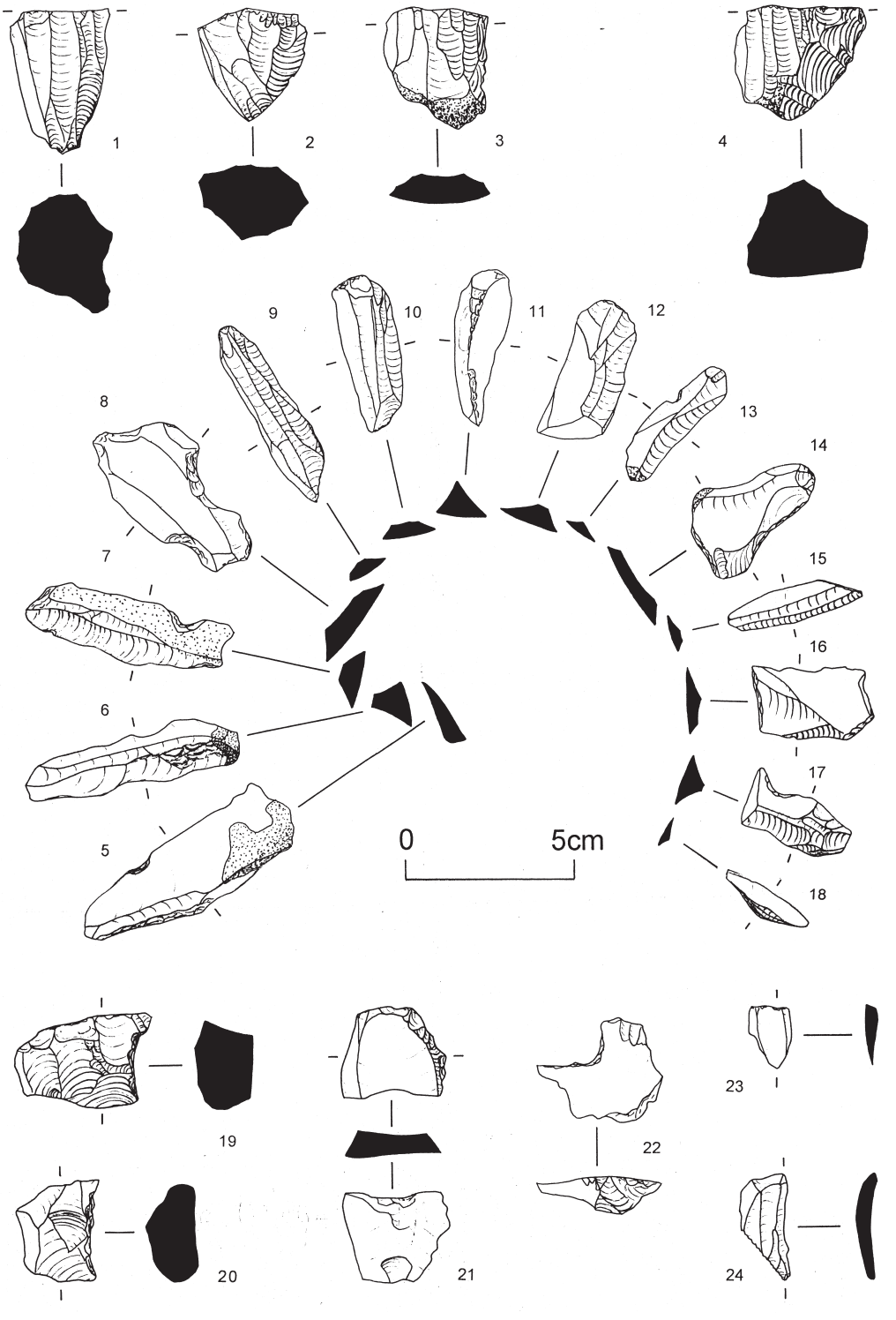

Fig. 1. Mesolithic/Early Neolithic flintwork.

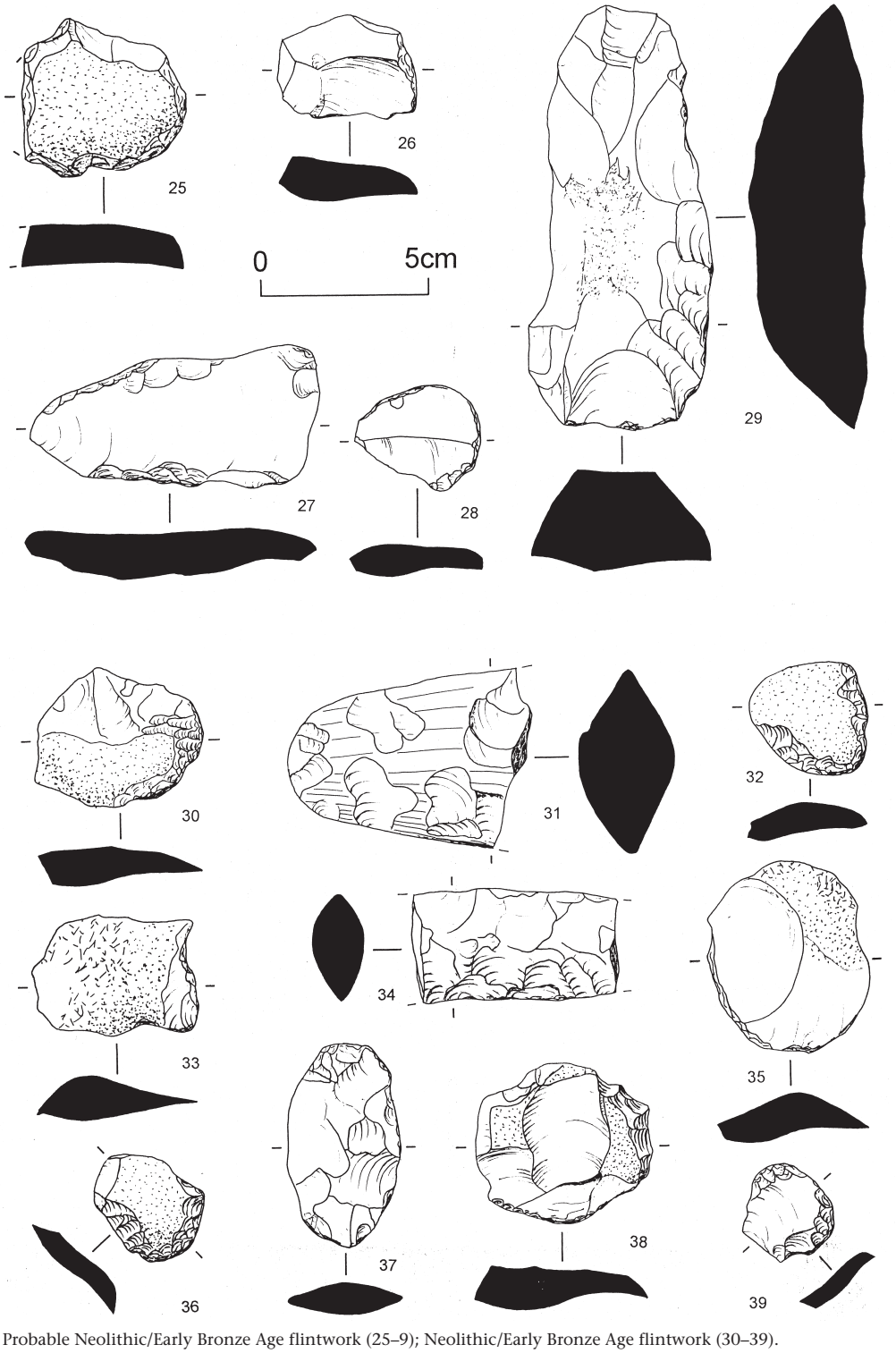

Fig. 2. Probable Neolithic/Early Bronze Age flintwork (25–9); Neolithic/Early Bronze Age flintwork (30–39).

Table 1. Flintwork in the Cuckoo trail assemblage.

Category/technology	Quantification					Date		Illustration (Figs 1 & 2)
	Total	Re-touch	Core preparation	Stained	Water-rolled			
Blade core	24		18	1	1	Mesolithic/early Neolithic		1, 2, & 4
Flake from blade core	27	7	17	6				3 & 22
Blades >3:1	11	1	7	4				9 & 10
Backed blade	2	2	2	1				5
Broken ?blade	53	5	17	14				N/I
Micro blade	14		4	1				N/I
Microlith	2	2						15 & 19
Blade <3:1	85	12	26	15	1			12
Notched blade	17	2	5	3				7 & 13
Crested blade	6		1	1				6
Notched crested blade	2	2	1	1				N/I
Blade-end/side scraper	4	4	3	1				14 & 21
Blade-end scraper/truncated blade	2	2	1					16
Waisted blade-end scraper	1	1						8
Blade-side scraper	3	3	2					N/I
Hollow blade scraper	3	3	1	1				N/I
Blade burrin	1	1						N/I
Blade piercer	1	1	1					17
Blade saw	1	1	1					24
Flake and blade core	17		9	3				N/I
Flake and blade core/hollow scraper	6	6	1				Neolithic/Early Bronze Age	19
Fabricator	4	4		2				11
Flakes <25 mm	98	4	40	15	2			23
Flake-end/side scraper	7	7	1	4		? ? ?		25, 28, 32 & 36
Flake-end scraper	3	3		2				26 & 33
Flake-side scraper	2	2		1				N/I
Hollow flake scraper	7	7		1				N/I
Notched flake	2	2		1				N/I
Adze	1			1				29
Thumbnail scraper	1	1						39
Polished axe	1			1				31
Flake >25 mm	134	28	1	51	8			35
Flake core	16			1	1			N/I
Flaked axe	1							34
Laurel leaf point	1							37
Flaked knife (broken)	1							N/I
Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead	4			1				N/I
Flake piercer	1	1						N/I
Chips	102	4		6	5			N/I
Hammer-stone fragments	2				2			N/I

a very different subsistence strategy for the site during this period, possibly including woodland clearance and permanent settlement. Other finds from the locale indicate a similar range of activities for the area as a whole during the two periods. These include lightweight Mesolithic/Early Neolithic flintwork from three Hellingly locations just upstream of the present site (Holden & Row 1974, 6; Garwood 1984, 64; Unpublished), and two Neolithic axes, one from an unknown location in Hellingly (Holden & Row 1974, 6), and one from a few hundred metres of the present site (Holden 1967, 321).

CONCLUSION

The Cuckoo Trail assemblage is important because of the long-term interest it shows in the area during prehistory, because of its findspot in the Cuckmere Valley, and because of the different subsistence strategies it represents. A recent paper by the Chairman suggests a link between the Neolithic use of the Downs, in the form of long barrows either side of the Cuckmere, and mutually intervisible Mesolithic sites such Endelwick Farm which were located upstream of them (Drewett 2003, 44–5). In support of this view he appeals to recent archaeological theory which sees the difference between the two periods as ideological rather than economic (Drewett 2003, 42, 44; Thomas 1991, 13–14). While tending to confirm a direct link between the two periods, by re-emphasizing a difference between the economic strategies employed by them, the Cuckoo Trail assemblage does so within a more traditional interpretative framework.

APPENDIX: SOURCES AND TAPHONOMY OF FLINT FROM THE WEALDEN MESOLITHIC

I have examined Mesolithic assemblages from seven sites in the Weald: Broadstone Warren (Tebbutt 1974), Butcher's Wood, Uckfield (Seager Thomas 1997), Endelwick Farm (Garwood 1984), Eridge Rocks (Greatorex & Seager Thomas 2000), the Hermitage (Jacobi & Tebbutt 1981), Selmeston (Clark 1934) and now the Cuckoo Trail. The sourcing of flint requires the survival of traces of its original surface and its original interior colour. With a few exceptions, conforming flints from these sites are grey to black in colour and have thick un-battered white or creamy white cortices. There are four sources of flint which meet this description locally, all of them on or near the Downs. Flint with an unstained cortex comes from the surface of the chalk (that from depth tends to be blacker and to have a much thinner cortex) or coombe rock, and flint with an iron-stained cortex comes from the Clay-with-flints or decalcified coombe deposits.

At first sight the assemblages examined by me appear to fall into one or other of these two groups. Those from the High Weald have unstained cortices and those from the Low Weald have stained cortices. But it is evident from my examination of the Cuckoo Trail assemblage that burial environment can blur such distinctions post-deposition, and, when we look at the burial environments of the assemblages from the two areas — iron-free and iron-rich, respectively — it seems certain that this is what we are seeing. The High Wealden assemblages have been leached of iron and the Low Wealden assemblages have been iron-stained. The exceptions referred to above are beach-battered and arrived on site directly from the seashore or indirectly via Wealden river gravels. They come from the Hermitage (Jacobi & Tebbutt 1981, 9) and Selmeston (Clark 1934, 141). With two possible exceptions, beach-battered flints in the Cuckoo Trail assemblage are all of later date.

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